Introduction

Was W. B. Yeats awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923 as much for his achievements in the theatre as for his poetry? Yeats himself thought so, a belief that R. F. Foster thinks 'laughable'.[1] The claim in 'The Bounty of Sweden' should not be dismissed so lightly. The reception speech delivered by Per Hallström, then chairman of the Nobel Foundation, did indeed suggest that the prize was being awarded as much for Yeats's accomplishments in poetic drama as in lyric poetry, making no specific mention of his poetry volumes yet lavishing praise on *The Land of Heart's Desire* and *The King's Threshold* as well as Yeats's attempts to reform the modern stage.[2] This may have been due to the fact that the figure of Yeats the dramatist was more readily identifiable as European than that of Yeats the lyric poet. Through the identifications he made with August Strindberg in 'The Bounty of Sweden', Yeats was making a connection between the achievement of Scandinavian theatre and that of the Irish dramatic movement, one made on several occasions as the movement was getting underway in the early 1900s. Sweden's most famous contemporary dramatist shared with Yeats a lifelong interest in esoteric mysticism and the possibilities of thought-transference.[3] In 'The Bounty of Sweden', Yeats recollected first encountering in Strindberg's Paris circle the idea of stage scenery suggesting a scene without attempting anything that a painting could do just as well.[4] Strindberg's *There are Crimes and there are Crimes* was staged at the Abbey Theatre in March 1913 under the direction of Lennox Robinson

[1] R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life: The Arch-Poet*, vol. II (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 250.
[2] Per Hallström, Presentation Speech, 10 December 1923, *Nobel Lectures, Literature, 1901–1967*, ed. Horst Frenz (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1969), pp. 194–8. On this point, see Carle Bonafous-Murat, 'The Reception of W. B. Yeats in France', *The Reception of W. B. Yeats in Europe*, ed. Klaus Peter Jochum (London: Continuum Press, 2006), p. 39.
[3] In an early draft of 'Ireland after Parnell', Yeats wrote that 'a friend of Strindberg's, in *delirium tremens*, was haunted by mice, and a friend in the next room heard the squealing of mice'. W. B. Yeats Collection, ms. 600, Emory.
[4] W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan Press, 1955), p. 358.

and several of his works were performed by the Dublin Drama League during the course of the 1920s.[5] Making his own relation to Synge a central component of the Stockholm address, Yeats was implicitly comparing it to that vibrant rivalry between Strindberg and Ibsen as the international profile of Scandinavian drama reached new heights towards the end of the nineteenth century, Yeats claimed to have met Strindberg in Paris in his 1917 essay 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae' and his autobiographical volume, 'The Trembling of the Veil'.[6] In so doing, Yeats was presenting himself as the Symbolist complement to the Naturalist genius of Synge, creating a context through which his achievement would resonate strongly for a Scandinavian cultural community shaped deeply by the legacies of Ibsen and Strindberg.

Helen Vendler has recently demonstrated the astonishingly rich variety of poetic forms Yeats engaged throughout his life.[7] In no poem, however, do we encounter experiments in form and subject quite so anarchic as *The Player Queen* and *The Herne's Egg*, dramas influenced by French Surrealism, German Expressionism and the Absurdist mode of Pirandello. Vendler took this experimentation to task in her 1963 study of the later plays, writing of *The Player Queen* as not really fit for performance.[8] Given the extent to which Yeats's reputation as poet has overshadowed his writing for the stage, this is not unexpected, but it characterises a long-standing disagreement in the critical reception of the drama, as Bernard O'Donoghue notes.[9] Vendler's disapprobation shows up a pervasive anomaly in this reception dating back to reviews of the earliest performances. From the outset, the forms of poetic speech Yeats wrote for the stage received a mixed reception, largely on the suspicion that the medium of poetic drama had become obsolete. At the same time, critics have felt that Yeats's plays were too ambitious in the degree of experiment envisaged. Reviewing the first run of *The Land of Heart's Desire* in April 1894, the *Daily Chronicle* praised its 'simplicity and freshness' for separating the play from 'the dismal category of pseudo-Elizabethan blank-verse dramas'. By contrast *The Bookman Review*, while admiring

[5] See, Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre, 1899–1999: Form and Pressure* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 61; Hugh Hunt, *The Abbey: Ireland's National Theatre, 1904–1978* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979), p. 101; Brenna Katz Clarke and Harold Ferrar, *The Dublin Drama League, 1919–1941* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1979).

[6] Yeats, *Autobiographies*, pp. 32, 347–8.

[7] Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

[8] Vendler, *Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays* (Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 124.

[9] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Yeats and the Drama', *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, ed. Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 101–14.

the play, worried that the contemporary theatre was not yet ready to accommodate the kind of experiment it involved.[10] So the first public performance of a Yeats play was praised for its success in staging a form that was in decline, and criticised for attempting an experiment too far ahead of its time.

This dichotomy endured through the course of the twentieth century. In his highly influential 1947 essay on Yeats's drama, Eric Bentley decried Yeats for becoming mired in late nineteenth-century poetic drama, a style, he worried, that might lead an audience to quickly lose interest in life itself. He went on to contrast the weakness of literary language in Yeats's plays to the vibrancy of Eliot, yet proceeded to argue that Yeats was 'perhaps the only considerable verse playwright in English for several hundred years'.[11] In his impressive 1976 study of Yeats's Noh plays, Richard Taylor objected that because he worked with 'outmoded material', the plays bore no relevance to 'modern outlook'. At the same time, he believed audiences of Yeats's day just were not ready for the level of experimentation he brought to the theatre; his drama was anachronistic yet ahead of its time.[12] Taylor's criticism touched upon a problem with which Yeats struggled, the harmonisation of form and theme – the many years spent reworking plays such as *The Countess Cathleen*, *The Shadowy Waters* and *The Player Queen* bore testament. Nonetheless, it illustrates an uncertainty that has remained in critical reception of Yeats's drama – that he was somehow too antiquated yet too experimental. Katharine Worth's 1978 study of the plays in *The Irish Drama of Europe* is a singular exception, a work that has largely fallen into obscurity as attention moved to post-colonial and later biographical rereadings of Yeats in the 1980s and 1990s.[13] Despite her efforts and those of other scholars such as James Flannery and Karen Dorn during the 1980s, the enduring impression of Yeats's drama to present times is that of a corpus valuable in understanding the development of the poet and anticipating the more assured achievement of Beckett, but of limited significance in itself.[14]

[10] *Daily Chronicle*, 24 April 1894; *The Bookman Review*, June 1894, NLI ms. 12145.
[11] Eric Bentley, *In Search of Theater* (New York: Vintage, 1947), pp. 296–7.
[12] Richard Taylor, *The Drama of W. B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese No* (London: Yale University Press, 1976).
[13] Katharine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe* (London: The Athlone Press, 1978).
[14] In recent assessments, Joep Leerrsen judges the drama an 'idiosyncratic side-product of Symbolism' and Bernard O'Donoghue sees its lasting value confined to the manner in which it anticipated Beckett. Joep Leerrsen, 'The Theatre of William Butler Yeats', *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 47–61; O'Donoghue, 'Yeats', pp. 101–14.

This study examines the development of Yeats's drama as the evolution of a vision of estrangement directed against the values of middle-class culture as industrial and commercial activity accelerated at the end of the nineteenth century. In so doing, it makes the case for Yeats as a major figure in early twentieth-century European avant-garde theatre in ways that call for a reassessment of his political thought. Yeats saw in the theatre a space for artistic experiment that might impact on society at large. One of his most famous lines has been read universally as a bitter reflection on his earlier part in the creation of a movement out of which the political turmoil of Ireland since 1916 emerged: 'Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?' (*VP*, 632). Beneath its note of despondency lay a certain fascination at the possibility that artistic experiment might have had such a revolutionary impact in the Ireland of his day. So much of Yeats's later writing appears a lament for the decline in status of the arts as scientific orthodoxy and commerce deepened their influence in Europe. Yet 'The Man and the Echo' is troubled by the opposite anxiety – the possibility that the theatre lay at the heart of political revolution in Ireland, releasing forces it could not control. Yeats saw in the theatre a laboratory in which the kinds of experiments practised in Scandinavia, France and Germany could be undertaken in shaping the direction of Irish social development from the 1890s.

Those conflicting criticisms that Yeats's drama was anachronistic yet too experimental derive in part from a misreading of his interests in folklore, mythology and magic. Through the long course of his career, Yeats saw the potential in these elements to disturb not only audience expectations of the theatre but also trends in wider society. He looked to these ancient forms of belief in representing what he sensed were processes hidden beneath the shift towards secular rationalism and a consumer culture. Bernard O'Donoghue argues that Yeats's plays were bedeviled by uncertainty as to precisely the kind of theatre he envisaged.[15] The judgement underplays the fact that Yeats was continually experimenting throughout his career in the theatre, responding to debates and new developments as they arose, beginning with the arrival of Ibsen's Naturalism and Maeterlinck's Symbolism in 1890s Paris. Furthermore, it is symptomatic of a contemporary presumption deeply contested in the European culture of Yeats's age; the idea of myth, magic and folklore as resources invoked in conservative resistance to liberalism, democracy and science. Coming under the influence of William Morris in his twenties, Yeats's early

[15] O'Donoghue, 'Yeats', pp. 111–12.

political attitudes were formed by a sense that the destitution of working-class life in contemporary industrial England was as much spiritual as material. In the combination of Morris's literature of medieval fantasy, his arts and crafts movement, and the socialism he preached through his pamphlets and Sunday evening gatherings, Yeats encountered a figure who pursued artistic refinement, cultural experiment and imaginative enrichment in the hope of creating a more just social order. Morris's revival of English folk traditions looked back to earlier times as a means of resisting the brutal exercise of power in defence of commercial interests. Through Morris, Yeats came into contact with the socialism of Shaw and Annie Besant, and also the anarchism of Prince Kropotkin. Within this milieu, different ideas on social experiment provided a political frame for Yeats's immersion in Blake during the 1890s. Drawn to the visionary power of Blake's mysticism, Yeats had also imbibed Blake's social radicalism, seeing in Blake's idea of magic a release of revolutionary energies in the modern world.

The Symbolist form of theatre that Yeats began in the 1890s with the first performance of *The Land of Heart's Desire* developed in this context. Part 1 of this study examines the early plays as contributions to the Symbolist movement in Paris and indebted in particular to the dramas of Maurice Maeterlinck. Challenging the widespread view of Symbolism as a hostile reaction to Naturalism, the ways in which Symbolist theatre conjured a mood of estrangement is examined as a response to changes in the system of economic value in modern Europe, their impact on family life and the social roles of men and women. Yeats's response to Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *Axël* indicates that he came under the influence of Symbolism not in outright rejection of Ibsen, but through a desire to extend the revolutionary impact of Naturalism beyond the model of the social criticism play. In their treatment of money and work, Yeats's early plays bore a significant relation to Marx's *Capital*, mediated through the influence of Morris. Drawing upon his knowledge of customs, beliefs and rituals, his presentation of Irish rural life in these plays combined Naturalist and Symbolist tendencies, in which the theme of social alienation in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was transformed by the larger vision of spiritual loss in Maeterlinck's *The Blind*. Yeats engaged situations at once familiar and strange; familiar to Irish audiences at least, but estranged in the unsettling presences of the otherworld in performances – the Fairy Child, the Demon Merchants, the Old Woman Cathleen ni Houlihan. Maeterlinck's influence on Yeats's representation of fetishism and taboo was important here, and the relation it bore both to Marx's idea of the

commodity fetish and to Freud's reading of childhood and primitive civilisation in *Totem and Taboo*. The incendiary impact of the co-authored *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in Dublin in 1902 derived from a coalescence of competing forces – Symbolism, Naturalism and Primitivism conceived as the estrangement of contemporary social experience. The opening chapter looks at how these elements shaped Yeats's first contributions to the Irish Dramatic Movement.

The experiments Yeats employed for the performances of his plays were far-ranging. His use of space, shadow and light to the end of static theatre, the vocal delivery demanded by the psaltery experiment, and the later use of dance and mask, together contributed to the creation of a theatre of art. This study challenges the presumption that this carried with it an elitist anti-democratic set of political values that Yeats would make explicit in his final years. The experiments Yeats undertook in the 1900s arose from his renewed interest in Ibsen and a desire to represent Ibsen's treatment of social alienation through the theatre of estrangement Maeterlinck had developed in the 1890s. This was particularly striking in his use of stage space in representing power relations and issuing forms of protest through Symbolist methods. Seanchan's hunger-strike in his 1903 play *The King's Threshold* is considered in this regard, as is the influence of the socialism Wilde espoused in his 1891 essay 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' on the 1906 version of *Deirdre*. Considered in the light of two plays significant to Yeats in the 1900s, Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* and Wilde's *Salomé*, the radical nature of the political ideas attaching to those experiments Yeats undertook in the 1900s comes into view, against the background of heated debates on cultural reform in Ireland.

Following the performances of Shakespeare's history cycle at Stratford-upon-Avon that he attended in the spring of 1901, Yeats began composing the first play in his own Cuchulain cycle, perhaps his defining achievement in the theatre.[16] The following study contests the view that Yeats engaged the Cuchulain myth to champion aristocratic ideals of heroism and nobility in a conservative denunciation of modern society as cheap and vulgar. This opinion ignores two important features of the Cuchulain plays – the internal subversion of heroism and the revolutionary power of the myth presented. The occult forms Yeats employed in the first two plays of the cycle, *On Baile's Strand* and *The Green Helmet*, hover uneasily between tragedy and farce, particularly the latter, Yeats's response to the

[16] See Terence Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999), p. 133.

Playboy riots marked here by his memory of Alfred Jarry's Surrealist farce of 1896, *Ubu Roi*. Responding to crowd energy in an age of expanding mass culture, this tension illustrated the influence of Nietzsche and Le Bon on Yeats's sense of revolutionary energy as the expression of collective will. The impact of the psaltery experiment on the 1904 production of *On Baile's Strand* and the recourse Yeats makes to medieval carnival and the grotesque in *The Green Helmet* were important dimensions to Yeats's sense of the historical forces shaping his age. Aspiring to create a radical popular movement in Ireland led by an artistic vanguard, Yeats was trying to harness the solemnity of Wagner and the ribaldry of Jarry.

Generally regarded as Yeats's retreat to an elite theatre of art, the Noh experiment in the later plays of the Cuchulain cycle, *At the Hawk's Well* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, are explored here as forms of anti-theatre through which he responded to the crisis in European culture made manifest in the First World War. While considerable attention has been given to the occult symbolism of these plays, little interest has been shown in their relation to Expressionism and Surrealism, artistic movements developed largely out of the trauma of the war in Europe. Yeats's work with Edward Gordon Craig in creating a new vision of the theatre lay within this context, explored here through the parallels between *At the Hawk's Well* and Oskar Kokoschka's *Murderer, Hope of Woman*, and the relation the Automatic Writing experiment behind *The Only Jealousy of Emer* bore to the practices of Surrealism. Since Theodor Adorno's damning judgement on the complicity of occultism with totalitarian ideology, the place of the occult within the European avant-garde has been the subject of critical disapproval. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's reading of Surrealism, I contend that the occult basis of these plays was more than simple mystification. An important development in Yeats's sense of the historical processes shaping his age became evident in the concept of race deriving from the Automatic Writing experiment that informs the Noh plays. Whatever the reactionary and eugenicist aspects of Yeats's later ideas on race, they served the purpose of expressing his sense of the machine age as a re-emergence of totem power in contemporary European society. Themes present since the 1890s in Yeats's critical response to modern industrial advance took on a new urgency in the aftermath of the First World War.

Yeats's last Cuchulain play, *The Death of Cuchulain*, was the outcome of a long process of reflection and experiment in the theatre extending over five decades. The influence of Luigi Pirandello is evident in the way Yeats structured the play, a dramatist whose plays shared more with the later work of Yeats than is acknowleged. Evidence of the complex nature

of Yeats's perspective on politics and culture in his last years, *The Death of Cuchulain* was significant in refusing to dramatise Cuchulain's death through a heroic struggle with his enemies, instead presenting it as ignominious and inseparable from the form of theatre itself. Considering the Old Man's prologue to the play and the Harlot's ballad with which it concludes, it is evident that the alienating effects Yeats sought in his final play testified not only the power of that struggle between heroism and farce but equally his very contemporary sense of myth. In its interruption of the ancient with the contemporary in conditions of pronounced artifice, *The Death of Cuchulain* involved a complex temporality within which the contingent and situational became the site from which a destiny might be realised, refusing the totalising authority of the traditional idea of myth. Alluding to Pearse, Connolly and Oliver Sheppard's statue of Cuchulain in the GPO commemorating the 1916 Rising, the Harlot's song suggested that this was the frame Yeats offered for understanding the Rising and its legacy.

The place of the Cuchulain cycle within the European avant-garde provides a framework for evaluating the range of theatrical experiments Yeats engaged from 1920. Yeats's response to the Easter Rising in the context of the First World War is explored here through a comparison of two dance plays published in 1921, *The Dreaming of the Bones* and *Calvary*. Deriving from his collaborations with Edmund Dulac and the Automatic Script begun after Yeats's marriage to George Hyde-Lees in 1917, both plays presented a situationalist treatment of myth later dramatised in *The Death of Cuchulain*. As a response to the 1916 Rising, *The Dreaming of the Bones* was part of a wider critique of modern culture evident in *Calvary*, a play instructive on the nature of Yeats's response to socialism in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. The influence of critical writing associated with *The New Age* on Yeats is important here, in particular the anonymously published *Cosmic Anatomy* of 1921, authored by Richard Wallace. The dance plays demonstrated the extent to which Yeats saw the degeneracy of modern political culture encapsulated in the First World War, and the Irish Rebellion an act of resistance, however ill-judged, to that trend.

Yeats's perspectives on contemporary history are explored further through a consideration of will and passivity in the later plays as responses to mass culture and totalitarian politics, addressing in particular the problem of agency in the modern world. The influence of Expressionism is considered here through the interest Yeats shared with the German dramatist Ernst Toller in Schopenhauer's philosophy of will when responding to the current of contemporary European politics. Yeats's reservations

about Expressionism was evident in his criticism of O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*, yet its influence was discernible in the techniques employed for some of his own plays, developed under Craig's direction. In Toller he encountered a dramatist who engaged Expressionist techniques to address the dehumanising aspects of mass politics. In *The Player Queen*, Yeats developed through allegory, mask and apocalyptic symbol that idea of a blind, impersonal will so important to Toller, creating a work sharply consonant not only with Toller's *Masses and Man* but also Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. In London, the Stage Society were first to produce the 1915 version of *The Player Queen* in 1919, a version first published in 1922 (*VPl*, xxii). The first major production of Toller's play had taken place at Berlin's Volksbühne Theatre the previous year in 1921, the same year as the first performance of Pirandello's work in Rome.[17] Looking at Yeats's play on Jonathan Swift, *The Words upon the Window-pane*, I consider the influence of Pirandello's notions of performativity and the absurd on the Expressionist themes of will and passivity Yeats shared with Toller. To dismiss as obscurantist Yeats's representation of history through esoteric mysticism overlooks the incisive manner through which *The Player Queen*, *The Words upon the Window-pane* and *The Herne's Egg* captured the profundity of spiritual disturbance and revolutionary change Europe was undergoing in the 1920s and 1930s. In their meta-theatrical aspects and the subversive representation of transcendence through violation and bestiality, these plays brought the perspective of farce to their treatment of will and passivity in presenting a vision of contemporary history through the medium of esoteric mysticism. In so doing, they occupy an important place within the European avant-garde between the wars.

The final chapter assesses *Purgatory* in terms of the criticism of contemporary European culture Yeats had developed since his engagement with Morris at the end of the 1880s. Here the influence of Expressionism is addressed through the significance of Strindberg's 1907 play, *The Ghost Sonata*, to the treatment of perception in *Purgatory*, a defining aspect of Yeats's penultimate play. Strindberg's work became significant to Yeats in the 1920s, a number of his plays performed at the Abbey Theatre by the Dublin Drama League. The influence of *The Ghost Sonata* on *Purgatory* also marks an important connection to Beckett, who had attended the opening performance of Yeats's play in 1938 and who was inspired by a Paris production of Strindberg's play to offer the first production of

[17] Ernst Toller, *Plays One*, ed. and trans. Alan Raphael Pearlman (London: Oberon Books, 2000), p. 15.

Waiting For Godot to Roger Blin. The preoccupation with perception that *Purgatory* inherited from *The Ghost Sonata* is traced here to Yeats's extended debate with Thomas Sturge Moore in the 1920s following his introduction to the new physics via Bertrand Russell's *ABC of Relativity*. The political perspectives informing the exchanges with Moore are evident in the references made to John Ruskin during its course. Yeats's rejection of theories of common sense and probability here had its origin in the attack on contemporary middle-class values he encountered in Morris and Ruskin in the 1880s. The treatment of perception in *Purgatory*, linked to Expressionism through the influence of Strindberg, was part of a larger critique of the commercialisation of European society Yeats had undertaken through his Symbolist plays since the 1890s. Both reactionary and radical elements in *On the Boiler*, the pamphlet with which *Purgatory* was first published, are traceable to Ruskin in particular. The ideas of race informing the play are best understood in relation to the ambivalence between totemism and commodity fetishism that inflected Yeats's attacks on contemporary middle-class pecuniary values throughout his life as poet and dramatist, shaped deeply by the intellectual culture Ruskin and Morris had developed in England.

Above all, this study aims to convey the range, sophistication and intellectual seriousness of Yeats's body of plays as responses to dramatic changes in the cultural landscape of Ireland and Europe from the 1890s to the 1930s. From his first publicly performed play at the Avenue Theatre in April 1894 to the double-bill of *On Baile's Strand* and *Purgatory* at the Abbey Theatre in August 1938 just months before his death, his sense remained undiminished of powerful historical forces working to diminish or destroy the most precious elements of human intellect and feeling. If his experiments with voice, movement and staging appeared at times overambitious, it was testament in part to the scale of what he sought to achieve. In seeking to cultivate a theatre that might awaken audiences to processes of commodification while holding out for a new sense of spiritual consciousness strong enough to address the social and intellectual transformations of the era, Yeats pursued an ideal that would inevitably meet with criticism and hostility. Dismissing his entire theatrical achievement as anachronistically idealist, however, represents in some measure a failure of criticism to grasp the visionary power of that ideal so pertinent to an age of secular and religious fanaticism, and all-encompassing consumerism.